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41ST CONGRESS, 2d Session. } HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. { EX. DOC. No. 144.

FUR-SEAL FISHERIES OF ALASKA.

LETTER

FROM

THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR

IN ANSWER TO

A resolution of the House, of February 9, 1870, transmitting a copy of a portion of Vincent Colyer's report relating to the fur-seal fisheries of Alaska.

FEBRUARY 18, 1870.—Referred to the Committee on Commerce and ordered to be printed.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
Washington, D. C., February 18, 1870.

SIR: I have the honor to transmit herewith "a portion of the report of Vincent Colyer, special Indian commissioner, in relation to the fur-seal fisheries on St. Paul Island, Alaska," which contains the information called for by a resolution of the House of Representatives, of the 9th instant, in the following words, viz:

Resolved, That the Secretary of the Interior be requested, if not inconsistent with public interest, to transmit to this house a copy of so much of the report of Vincent Colyer, Special Indian commissioner, as relates to the fur-seal fisheries in Alaska.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

J. D. COX, *Secretary.*

Hon. JAS. G. BLAINE,
Speaker House of Representatives.

WASHINGTON, D. C., *February 18, 1870.*

SIR: In response to the resolution of the House of Representatives, of February 9, calling for so much of my report on the Indian tribes in Alaska Territory as relates to the fur-seal islands, I have the honor to respectfully submit the following extract.

Sincerely, your obedient servant,

VINCENT COLYER,
Secretary Board of Indian Commissioners.

Hon. J. D. COX,
Secretary of the Interior, Washington, D. C.

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A portion of the report of Vincent Colyer, special Indian commissioner, in relation to the fur-seal fisheries on St. Paul Island, Alaska.

[Extract.]

THE LANDING.

We arrived at the island of St. Paul, in the Behring Sea, on the morning of the 8th of October, 1869. A strong current to the westward carried us out of our reckoning over twenty miles.

As we dropped anchor in Southwest Bay, the wind died away and there was a light surf breaking on the beach. There is no harbor on either St. Paul or St. George's Island, and vessels have to wait upon the course of the winds to make successful landings. There is good anchorage in several bays, and so long as the winds remain favorable, vessels can load and discharge cargo without difficulty. Captains have to keep watchful care, however, to avoid being caught in unfavorable gales.

Along the shore of St. Paul's Island the fur-seals were gathered in great herds, called rookeries. They were evidently excited at the approach of our steamer, and their bellowing resembled the sheep and cattle in the great sale markets near our large cities. The noises were varied. The young pups at times bark like a dog, though their more common cry resembles the bleating of a lamb; the older ones bellow like a cow. As their motion is slow over the ground, and the animals smell strong, they are not unlike a heard of swine, though much less offensive, and incomparably more attractive and interesting.

While the officers from the island were assorting their letters and exchanging congratulations with their friends on board our steamer, the captain lowered a quarter boat, and arranged for the passage of the interpreter, Colonel Wicker, and myself, to the shore. On our way thither the young seals assembled around us in large numbers. They appeared delighted at the presence of the boat, the movement of the oars, and the fluttering of our United States revenue flag, and after looking at us with their dark hazel eyes, large and beautiful as those of the gazelle, raising their heads erect and stretching their necks as far out of the water as they could, they would dive down only to again appear and take another look. At last they got into regular order and motion on either side of us, turning somersaults like porpoises, and, forming an escort, accompanied us to the shore.

PRIVATE INTERVIEWS WITH THE ALEUTES.

Having provided myself with an interpreter in whose ability, honesty, and truthfulness I could rely, while the officers walked up to headquarters on the island, I went into the cabins of the Aleutes. As this interpreter had previously resided on the island, the Aleutes warmly welcomed us, and were at once very frank in their communications. They said that they were doing about as in years gone by; that they were now killing seals three times a week—on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; that they usually killed between two and three thousand on each of these days, or about eight thousand per week; that there were at the present time about sixty thousand skins in salt on the island; that these skins were stored in four salt-houses on four different points on the island; that one of these salt-houses was near at hand; another a short distance across the village, on Southeast Bay; a third about five miles to the northwest of the village, on Southwest Bay; and the fourth fifteen miles

to the northeast, on Northeast Point. As the revenue officer in charge on the island, in coming ashore with us in the long-boat, had said that there were only thirty thousand seals killed this season, and only that number of skins now on the island, the above statement of the Aleutes, doubling this amount, arrested my attention.

The Aleutes further said that they received forty cents per seal for killing, skinning, &c., and that they usually averaged fifty skins per day to each man, though experts could capture one hundred animals; that they received pay either in goods from the store or in cash, as they chose. The killing commences some years as early as June, and continues in a fragmentary way during July, and is at its height in August, September, and October, during which latter two months by far the larger number of skins are taken. It will be seen by the above that the season averages not more than sixteen weeks, and, at these rates, an able-bodied Aleute can support his family comfortably.

THE ALEUTES.

There are about two hundred and fifty natives on St. Paul's Island, and one hundred and twenty-five on St. George. Of the two hundred and fifty on St. Paul's, not more than fifty are relied on as active hunters. The women assist liberally, both in carrying the skins to the salt-houses and in waiting on the men, carrying water, &c. All the Aleutes are nominal members of the Russo-Greek church. A few of the more intelligent can read and write, but these are very few. All of them are intelligent, peaceable, generally industrious, and ambitious to improve.

There are about forty houses, or huts, built of turf and grass on a frame-work of timber like the sketch opposite. They are about twenty feet long by fifteen feet wide, with roofs not over seven feet high. They resemble the huts our soldiers erected for winter quarters during the war, and, like them, while warm and comfortable, are often over-crowded, and lack both light and ventilation. The light is admitted through a transparent skin or bladder, and the door-ways are usually so small and low that you have to stoop to pass through them. The furniture is scanty: a few wooden chairs or stools, a broad bunk of boards raised about a foot from the ground, on which is usually laid a mattress of grass or straw, with a blanket or two for sleeping; two or three marmot-skin frocks from Oukamok Island; some Behring Sea duck-skin shirts; water-proof jackets, made of the intestines of the seal; a harpoon, bunch of arrows and bow for sea-otter hunting; occasionally a flint-lock musket, and a copy of the Russo Greek, and Aleutian Island dialect translation of St. Matthew's Gospel, comprehend the whole of their possessions.

The Aleutes were silent at first when I inquired if they were treated kindly by their employers, though they frankly acknowledged that they were better off than when under the rule of the Russian Fur Company, and their houses were improved, but as that was a condition of serfdom it was not saying much.

The price they paid for goods and provisions was not high, considering the distance they were brought, it being about one-third more than at San Francisco.

Several of the children could play skillfully on the accordeon, and this I found to be a favorite instrument among them. The women are very handy with the needle, some of their embroidery and sewing being as good as that done by any.

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MONOPOLIES.

The men said there were two sets of employers for whom they worked on the island, though of late they had put the seal skins of both firms in one store-house, and all things appeared to be in common. These two firms obtained from Mr. McCullough, late Secretary of the Treasury, permission to place two men on the islands, ostensibly to take care of their buildings only. All other persons or firms are forbidden to land, the act of Congress of last year expressly prohibiting the killing of any fur seals. (See Appendix X.)

This apparent partiality in favor of the two above-named firms provokes wide-spread dissatisfaction on the Pacific coast, and probably accounted for a great deal of the scandal, so general among the people out there, in regard to the reported irregularities supposed to be practiced on those islands.

Having noted the above statements of the Aleutes, I left them and went to call on the officers and present my letter of introduction from General Davis and authority from the President. I met the lieutenant, the revenue officer in charge on the island, in company with Colonel Frank W. Wicker, in the salt-house. They had just come down from headquarters. Colonel Wicker asked the lieutenant how many skins were in that salt-house. I understood the lieutenant to say, in reply, about twenty-eight thousand. Colonel Wicker then asked if that was the only house in which skins were stored. The lieutenant replied that there was one other at the other side of the village, in which there was about two thousand skins. Colonel Wicker then said, "And that is all there are at present on the island?" The lieutenant answered, "Yes." It was then near dark and we left the store-house, took our yawl and went on board the steamer.

The wide discrepancy between these two statements of the lieutenant and the Aleutian Islanders caused me to report the same to Colonel Wicker, and that there might be no misunderstanding I put them in writing and officially addressed the note to the colonel.

It had been our intention to leave the next morning, but these contradictory statements caused the colonel and Captain Evans to remain another day and make an examination of the island.

The next morning, Saturday, October 9, we landed through a very heavy surf, and Colonel Wicker commenced making his examinations, asking me to assist in the measurements, the lieutenant in charge of the revenue on the island and Captain Evans, of the Lincoln, being present. We measured one pile, carefully counted the number of skins in it, took that as a standard, and then measured carefully the other piles.

THREE SAILORS DROWNED.

While we were engaged in examining the two houses near the village, word came that two vessels, a schooner and a bark, were hovering off the island. This called away Captain Evans. Colonel Wicker and myself completed the measurements. We had hardly finished this part of our work before we heard the cry that one of our boats with a crew of five men in it was capsized in the surf, and we hurried down to the beach only to see them struggling helplessly in the surf an eighth of a mile away. Captain Evans and a crew of ten volunteer Aleutes were vainly endeavoring to get near them in the only boat at hand. Above the roar of the tumultuous seas could be heard the piteous cries

of the drowning men, and there was no adequate means at hand to save them. The Aleutes, after several narrow escapes from swamping, gave up the effort, and, rowing behind the ledge of rocks toward which the drowning men were drifting, leaped from their boat, and at the risk of their lives, went through the breakers and brought the bodies ashore.

The officers of the government and the agents of the traders on the island were unremitting in their efforts to save the lives of the men, but three of them were dead, and we had great difficulty in restoring to life the two others.

THE FUR SEALS.

This painful incident occupied us for several hours, and it was afternoon before we were able to start across the island to visit "Southwest Bay House," five miles distant. Our party was Colonel Wicker, Joseph, the interpreter, an Aleute of the island as guide, and myself. We walked over, and found the path led along by the shore through half a dozen large seal rookeries. From a count and measurement we made we must have passed by on this shore, five miles long, nearly a million of seals, and yet this is not one-half of the space they occupy on St. Paul's Island. They were of all sizes, from the young pup, about as big as a very large cat, to the old males, as large as a cow. Their color varies from a gray-brown of the old ones to a dark-brown in the young pups. The females seem shorter in the neck, and had the wide pelvis common to the sex. They measure, by guess, about five feet in length. The male seal is much larger, measuring seven or eight feet in length, and weighing over a thousand pounds. Some of these were on guard, others were in the water. I saw nothing of that systematic herding of families by the old males referred to by the Russian authorities, probably because it was so late in the season. The bachelors, as the young males of four or five years are called, were swimming along shore, and moving with the crowd of old and young on the plateaus above. Some of them could be seen for half a mile on the hill-tops inland, three or four hundred feet above the sea. These plateaus extend from the base of the hills to the sea, a distance of five hundred yards. As the islands are volcanic, the sand is broken at intervals with black volcanic rock cropping out. The seals appear to like these stones, and clambered over them with great facility, considering the peculiar formation of their flippers. The assertion that the fur-seal eats but little food from June to September may be true; certainly there was little or no offensive excrement even in October, when I believe it is acknowledged that they do get some food from the water.

There were myriads of young pups along shore and in the water, and they are most beautiful animals. They will not always run at your approach, though generally, if they are between you and the water, they will hurry off to the water. We saw but few sea-lions. Our guide informed us that they frequented the northeast point more, though there had not been as many there as usual. The Aleutes seemed to regard their absence as an ill omen. It seems that some years since all the seals left these Pribilov islands and went to Behring and Copper islands, on the Russian coast. As the Russians reserved these two islands in the sale of Alaska, there is some solicitude lest the seals should get frightened away and go there again. The old sea-lions are regarded as the pioneer or picket guards of the fur-seal, and their absence is looked upon with distrust.

The skin of the sea-lion, as well as the flesh, is highly prized; the

former for covering bidarkas or canoes, and the latter for food. These huge animals are usually killed with a musket ball.

The seal pup is born usually in the months of July and early part of August, about a fortnight after the mothers have arrived on the island.

The males arrive about the middle of June, and the yearling pups follow their mothers the latter part of July. The young pups are said to be in no hurry to go into the water, the parents having to force them in at first, when their elder brothers, the bachelors, take charge of them and teach them to swim.

In killing the seal, the two and three-year old male pups are chosen, both for the quality of their fur, lightness of the pelt, and to preserve the supply. The hunters get between the herd and the water, which is a very easy thing to do, and drive them a short distance inland toward the salt-houses, when they select their animals, and with a hard wooden club tap them a light blow on the nose or head, and so kill them. Care has to be taken in the driving not to overheat the animals, so as to loosen the fur and ruin the skin; generally they are allowed to rest awhile before the killing commences. The guide explained to us that in the skinning all the Indians had a common interest, each Aleute doing his best and sharing the receipts; the chief receiving an extra portion.

On our way we passed a number of the slaughter places. They were much nearer the rookeries and the shore than the descriptions, and the much talked of necessary precautions against frightening the animal, would lead you to suppose. In some cases they were not a hundred yards from the rookeries, and the dead bodies were within easy reach of the rambling bachelor seals. Large quantities of meat was wasted, and in many instances even the fat was not cut off. The meat of the seal is of excellent flavor. I should think quite equal to mutton. Our sailors eat it with relish, and I have no doubt that it could be salted, preserved, shipped in casks, and soon find a market. As it now lies rotting on the fields, the smell is most offensive, and as one of the slaughter pens is immediately near the village, the marvel is that it has not bred a contagious disease.

In some places where these seals have been thus killed, and the carcasses allowed to rot for many years, I should think the soil would be as valuable a fertilizer as guano. The great rank grass grows above these slaughter places in rich luxuriance. As ballast it might pay to transport to the southern ports.

We found quite a large lot of skins in this "Southwest Bay" house, and the guide assured us that the building had been full and emptied about a month before, the skins having been carried on board a steamer.

The skins were packed in piles with the fur turned inwards, and salt put in between each skin. After being allowed to remain awhile, they are taken up, refolded, and with fresh salt made ready for shipment.

A large surf boat, made of the skins of the sea-lion, is used to carry them out to the vessels.

On our return we passed by a lake of beautiful clear, cold water, from which the natives obtain the supply for their village—nearly a mile distant. Half of this distance they carry it in boats by water. When St. Paul Island and its immense source of income is properly cared for by our government, an aqueduct of simple construction should be built to convey this water to the town.

There was no school worth the name on the island. The Russian foreman of one of the traders professed to call a class of five or six together at irregular hours; but I found he thought but little of it, and

the natives regarded it of still less value. They asked for schools and teachers earnestly.

The priest who officiates in a neatly-built church receives one hundred and thirty dollars per annum. He is not in orders, and hardly ranks as a deacon in the church. The priest from Oumlaski occasionally comes up and administers the sacrament.

The chiefs, of whom there are two, get forty dollars a month extra pay, and the workmen are divided into three classes of different degrees of expertness or character. Thieving and misdemeanors other than drunkenness are unknown among the Aleutes.

On our return we found our guide greatly agitated at the prospect of punishment, which he feared he would receive from the United States officials on the island for showing us the path over to the remote salt-house. We assured him that his fears were groundless, but this did not quiet his anxieties.

There were some cattle and sheep on the island, and we found good grazing; plenty of grass as far as we went or could see. There are no trees, and the hills are not generally steep. A few of the highest, at a distance, I should say were not over two thousand feet high. They appeared covered with verdure to their tops. The cattle and sheep are reported as doing well.

FUTURE MANAGEMENT OF THE FUR-SEAL FISHERIES.

The whole management of these islands, and the obtaining from the fur seal fisheries a handsome income by our government, is a very simple affair. One capable and honest man with one or two assistants on each of the two islands, and a force of a dozen men well armed, under fixed regulations, forbidding the killing of over one hundred and fifty thousand seals annually, restricting the killing for the present to the Aleutes, paying them a liberal compensation, providing for the sale of the skins either on the island, at San Francisco, or New York, and exacting severe penalties for all violations of the law, would regulate it.

The officer in charge should be a first-class man, with a liberal salary and under heavy bonds, as his life will be an isolated one and his temptations to dishonesty great.

The proposal to lease the islands has the objection that it revives the old fur company monopolies, and our people will not be likely to tolerate this; and as it will require the same amount of governmental watchfulness and consequent expense to protect the lessors in their rights, as it would for the government to manage the concern itself, it would seem practical economy for our government to take charge of the business. Last spring the Chamber of Commerce at San Francisco appointed a committee to ascertain the facts in relation to the fur seal fisheries of Alaska, and report. This report so plainly gives the view which is taken by a large number of people in California that I inclose it. See Appendix U.

A letter from Adolph Muller, on the prices for furs ruling in San Francisco last October, I append, C, though other furriers assured me that Mr. Muller's prices were altogether too low.

But to resume my narrative. On Sunday the 10th, we buried our three sailors, Richard Livingston, Lewis Garlipp, and John Beck, with funeral honors, on the island. The last rites had hardly been celebrated before three Aleutes, of their own accord, brought forward three tall wooden crosses, and placed one at the head of each of the graves.

That afternoon we held a talk with the Aleutes, in the presence of the officers of the island and of the steamer, and were confirmed in a conclusion which we had arrived at long since in our intercourse with Indians, namely, that they will not state any of their grievances in public

in presence of the powers that are set over them. In this they resemble most poor and dependent people.

In the private interviews held with them two days before, five of the Aleutes complained that they had been brought from Kodiack Island by the agent, of one of the firms on the island, for a limited period; that the contract had expired some time since, but that the firm had since placed a hundred dollars each to their credit, and now claimed to hold them another year against their will. Lieutenant Mast, commanding St. Paul and St. George Islands, having heard of this statement through Colonel Wicker, in a letter to the colonel denied it, and declared that the Kodiack natives had acquiesced in the arrangement.

VESSELS SAILING FOR SANDWICH ISLANDS.

One of the men complained that he had been shipped as a sailor to come to these islands, and return home, but that when he arrived here the vessel sailed for the Sandwich Islands, where he did not wish to go. This last statement was not denied by any one present. If our steamer could have stopped at Kodiack on our way home, I would have asked permission to take this man home, and have arranged the best I could for the others. As it was, I could only commend them to the considerate care of the United States officers on the island.

This meeting, as well as the burial service of the sailors, was held in the open air. The sun was shining clearly, and the weather was so mild half of the officers and men had no overcoats, and yet it was the 10th of October, and we were on an island in the Behring Sea.

CITIZEN ALEUTES.

As we were walking down to the shore to embark, a number of the chiefs and head men of the Aleutes gathered around me, and in private asked me about our form of government, and whether it was true "that all men were free and equal," and whether they would be allowed to vote for the President, or the "emperor," as they called him, thinking of their former Russian government. I said yes, I hoped so. They shook my hand warmly, and when we left the shore gave us three slow but very loud cheers, which our officers and men returned with a will.

We then sailed for the "Northeast Point," fifteen miles away, to make the final examination of the skins stored in that salt-house. All along this eastern shore, as on the western, which we had passed the day before, myriads of fur-seals were congregated, so that we could not but conclude there was a large million and a half on the island. The surf ran high as we landed, and the men, remembering their loss of the day before, shook their heads doubtingly as they dashed us through it. We thought more about the heavy taxes of the people, and whether the Aleutes, or our officers on the island, were the more accurate in counting seal-skins. We carefully measured the piles of skins in the salt-house, counted up the figures, and found the Aleutes were right. There were over sixty thousand skins on the island.

As if reluctant to leave the three brave sailors who had sacrificed their lives to duty, our good ship Lincoln "missed stays," turned her face to the island, remained immoveable for a few minutes and then slowly obeying her helm, steamed off toward our home on the other side of the republic, six thousand miles away.

Faithfully, your obedient servant,

VINCENT COLYER,
United States Special Indian Commissioner.